

Inclusion of Legally Blind Women in the Randolph-Sheppard Program: Issues and Practices

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Abstract: A national survey of directors of the Business Enterprise Program Vending Facility Program indicated that women who are legally blind are significantly under-represented, making up about 24% of the licensed facility managers. This article reports on the survey, and suggests ways to eliminate barriers to the recruitment of women into the program.

The Randolph-Sheppard Act of 1936 (20 U.S.C., Section 107, *et seq.*) established the Randolph-Sheppard Vending Facility Program, known in most states as the Business Enterprise Program (BEP). The BEP provides persons who are legally blind (defined as a person who has not more than 20/200 central acuity in the better eye with correcting lenses or a limitation in the field of vision such that the widest diameter in the better eye subtends at an angle of no more than 20°) with remunerative employment through their operation of vending facilities on federal property. Amendments to the act in 1954 and 1974 strengthened the program, widened the scope of the types of facilities included (vending machines, cafeterias, snack bars, fast-food facilities, and gift-card shops), and extended economic opportunities to legally blind facility managers (also known as operators or vendors) (Moore & Tucker, 1994). This legislation created greater self-employment opportunities for women who are legally blind.

Although the literature is replete with data on the difficulties that women generally encounter in becoming self-employed

(Barnes-Bryant, 1994; Dant, Brush, & Iniesta, 1996; Devine, 1994; Kennedy et al., 1997; McDonough, 1997; Nakanishi, 1997; Nosek, Howland, & Young, 1997; Nosek et al., 1997; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996), there is a dearth of information on opportunities for self-employment by women who are blind. For that matter, there is little information about women's access to state rehabilitation services (Danek, 1992), which is the first step in gaining access to such programs as the BEP.

The study presented here documented the level of inclusion of women in the BEP—one of the few programs that could give a significant number of women who are legally blind opportunities to become self-employed—and investigated the relationship between the percentage of female facility managers in the program to such variables as type of facility, race-ethnicity, and stages of training. In this article, the empirical data are augmented by suggestions from the directors of the BEP regarding the strategies they use to recruit women into the program and the strategies they believe that state licensing agencies

(SLAs) could use to recruit more applicants (both female and male).

Background

REFERRAL OF WOMEN FOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Thurer (1982) found that the referral rate of women for vocational rehabilitation (VR) services was slightly lower than that for men (47% versus 53%). Harrison and Wayne (1986a, 1986b, 1986c) noted that fewer women applied for rehabilitation services, but a higher proportion were accepted. Menz et al. (1987) found no difference in the acceptance rates for men and women with disabilities into state rehabilitation agency programs in Region V between 1972 and 1984; however, women aged 16-24 were underrepresented in the system.

In a recent study of services to vocational rehabilitation consumers based on sex, race, and closure status, Wheaton, Finch, Wilson, and Granello (1997) tested whether different groups varied in the number of services they received. They indicated that no effect existed for sex, although women were more likely to receive miscellaneous training and restoration services.

Rogers, Schmitt, and Scholl (1997) summarized a variety of factors that may lead to an unwillingness by women who are visually impaired (those who are blind or have low vision) to pursue training or employment goals. Thus, it appears that women with visual impairments are significantly more disadvantaged than men with visual impairments in obtaining satisfactory employment and have much higher rates of underemployment and unemployment than

do sighted women or visually impaired men.

EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN

Women in the United States have historically had fewer career opportunities, have generally been relegated to lower-paying jobs, and have been paid less than men in the same occupations. More women are in the job market in the late 1990s than at any time in history. Furthermore, although a large gender gap in salaries still exists, it has decreased considerably since 1972 (Menz & Gilbert, 1987; Sorenson, 1991). Richardson (1994) reported that the work experiences of men and women with disabilities are different, suggesting that discrimination based on gender may exceed that based on disabilities. She pointed out that "less than 33% of women with disabilities are employed, and only 13% are employed full-time" (p. 95). Baldwin (1991) concluded that employed women with disabilities earn less than men, both nondisabled and disabled, which indicates that the determinants of employment and wage discrimination may be related to occupational segregation more than to disability.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (McNeil, 1996) found that women with disabilities had lower rates of labor force participation in 1991-92 than did men with disabilities (63.7% versus 83.9% for those with mild disabilities and 22.7% versus 23.9% for those with severe disabilities). Furthermore, only 13% of the women with disabilities were employed full-time.

With regard to working-age persons with visual impairments, Kirchner and Peterson (1988) found that less than one-third were in the labor force in 1976 (20% of the

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the Census (McNeil, 1991) shows that men with disabilities have a higher labor force participation rate than women with disabilities for those with mild to moderate disabilities (28.6% versus 23.9% for those with severe disabilities). Furthermore, the number of women with disabilities who are employed full-time.

working-age persons with disabilities Kirchner and Peterson (1989) found that more than one-third were employed in 1976 (20% of the

women and 43% of the men), compared to almost three-fourths of the general, working-aged population in the United States. Corn, Muscella, Cannon, and Shepler (1985) noted that women who were visually impaired perceived themselves as having substantially more barriers to employment than did sighted women.

WOMEN IN THE BEP

Only a limited amount of research has been conducted on the number of female BEP facility managers. Partos and Kirchner (1986) derived data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration's R300 forms for fiscal year 1981, which were completed by rehabilitation counselors in all states when they closed clients' cases. They found that 254 persons were referred for training as facility managers, or about 7% of the 3,420 facility managers in 1981. There was no way to determine, however, if these trainees actually became facility managers, except indirectly from other sources. On the assumption that 58% of all the trainees were placed in 1981, Partos and Kirchner estimated that only 29% of those who were referred were women, although the total percentage of women whose cases were closed was 57% across VR agencies. It has been argued that the difference in these percentages is probably due to the large number of female homemakers whose cases were closed (Giesen & McBroom, 1986; Partos & Kirchner, 1986). Although these data are quite old, there is no empirical evidence to indicate conditions have changed significantly since the data were collected.

Tedder and Maxson (1989) conducted a cross-sectional survey of facility managers in five states, or 6% of the facility managers

in the nation, in rural and urban areas and separately administered and combined agencies. They found that 24% of the facility managers in these states were female: 28% of all snack bar managers, 16% of all cafeteria managers, and 10% of all vending route managers. Of those surveyed, 19% were totally blind, 68% were legally blind with some useful vision, and 13% were visually impaired (technically legally blind).

Given the limitations inherent in the data bases used in the two preceding studies, it was not possible to determine if all persons referred by the associated VR agencies for training actually became licensed facility managers, and one would expect that more were referred for training than actually became managers. However, in both studies the overall proportions of female managers were similar (29% in Partos & Kirchner's 1986 study and 24% in Tedder & Maxson's, 1989), which suggests that there were considerably fewer female than male facility managers and that the number of women whose cases were closed by VR agencies and were referred for BEP training was low.

The study

METHOD

To determine the percentages of female and male facility managers in each state and region, the authors developed a survey form and mailed the forms to BEP directors in the 49 states with BEPs and the District of Columbia. The Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and other U.S. territories were not included, nor was Montana, which does not have a BEP. The BEP directors were asked to report the number of men and women in

their programs as of September 30, 1994, as well as data reported on the last RSA 15 forms they submitted as part of their Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) annual reports. Other questions were related to the directors' perceptions of their states' programs, and allowed the directors to explain their answers. The survey contained 23 items and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. A second, follow-up survey was sent to the directors who did not respond to the initial request.

Because only one group was examined (the BEP directors who responded to the survey), dependent I-tests were used to determine if any significant differences existed among several key descriptive variables: gender, race-ethnicity, types of facilities, and training. These tests were evaluated via an alpha level of .05. Also, in these tests, percentages instead of frequencies were used to prevent the artificial raising of the means for states with denser populations for the variables in question and to give weight to each state. As Roscoe (1978) recommended, at least 10 pairs of percentages were needed for each comparison.

Results

Of the 50 surveys that were mailed, 40 (80%) were returned, signed by the respective BEP directors or their designees. Of the 2,310 facility managers who were employed in the 40 states, only 23.9% were female and 76.1% were male (see Table I for a breakdown by region). The total number of facility managers reported by individual states ranged from 2 to 193.

The number of female managers ranged from 0 to 51. The state percentages of female facility managers (excluding North Dakota, which had only a few male man-

agers and no female manager) ranged from 8.6% to 44.4%. The five states with the lowest percentages of female managers were Delaware (12.5%), Nebraska (10.5%), Nevada (9.5%), Rhode Island (9.5%), and Washington (8.6%). The states with the highest percentages of female managers were South Dakota (44.4%), Idaho (41.7%), Colorado (39.5%), Maine (37.5%), and Hawaii (37.1%). Using the data summarized in Table I, the authors conducted a dependent I-test to compare the percentages of male and female facility managers across the 40 states. The results indicated that the average percentage of female managers was significantly lower than the average percentage of male managers: $t(38) = 15.46, p < .00$.

The races-ethnicities of the sample of facility managers by gender are presented in Table 2. On the basis of these data, a set of dependent I-tests indicated that the mean percentages of White, $t(36) = 6.43, p < .01$; Black, $t(35) = 2.95, p < .01$; and Hispanic, $t(35) = 2.27, p < .03$, male managers were significantly higher than the mean percentages for their female counterparts. However, no significant differences were found between male and female managers for the Asian, $t(35) = 1.45, p < .16$; American Indian, $t(34) = -1.79, p < .08$; or other groups, $t(34) = 1.85, p < .07$.

Next, analyses were conducted to compare the mean percentages (calculated across states) of female facility managers across the six racial-ethnic groups. The results were as follows:

1. The mean percentage of white female managers (17.7%) was greater than the mean percentages for the blacks, $t(35) = 4.93, p < .00$; Hispanics, $t(35) = 5.62, p < .00$; and others, $t(34) = 6.31, p < .00$.

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Table 1

Number and percentage of female facility managers in the 10 RSA regions.*

RSA region	States		Facility managers		
	Number in region	Number that responded	Total number	Number of women	% of women
I	6	5	120	27	22.5
II	2	1	77	14	18.2
III	6	5	276	66	23.9
IV	8	5	472	120	25.4
V	6	6	596	148	24.8
VI	5	4	289	72	24.9
VII	4	4	125	23	18.4
VIII	6	4	66	25	37.9
IX	4	3	226	43	19.0
X	4	3	63	14	22.2
All regions	51	40	2,310	552	23.9

* Including the District of Columbia and excluding the territories.

- The mean percentage of the black female managers (3.8%) was greater than the mean percentages for the Hispanics, $1(35) = 5.47$, $p < .02$, and Asians, $1(35) = 2.21$, $p < .03$, but not for the American Indians, $1(34) = 2.01$, $p < .053$. (The comparison for others could not be calculated because there were no individuals in that category.)
- The mean percentage of the Hispanic female managers (1.4%) did not differ significantly from the associated mean percentages for Asians, $1(35) = 1.09$, $p < .28$, or American Indians, $1(34) = 1.14$, $p < .26$. (The comparison for others could not be calculated because there were no individuals in that category.)
- The mean percentage of Asian female managers (.4%) did not differ from the

associated mean percentage for the American Indians, $1(34) = 0.0$, $p < 1.00$. (The comparison for others could not be calculated because there were no individuals in that category.)

- The average percentage of American Indian female managers (.4%) could not be compared with others because there were no individuals in the latter category.

Another set of dependent I-tests was completed to determine whether significant differences existed in the mean percentages of men and women who managed different types of BEP facilities. The results indicated the following:

- The average percentage of men who managed snack bars (32 %) was significantly higher than the average percentage of women (12%): $1(35) = 4.82$, $p < .00$.
- The average percentage of men who managed cafeterias (13%) was higher than the comparable average for women (5%): $1(35) = 3.39$, $p < .00$.
- The average percentage of men who managed vending, machine facilities (19%) was greater than the comparable

Table 2

Percentages of female and male facility managers of different racial ethnic groups.

Racial-ethnic group	Women	Men
White	17.7	60.7
Black	3.8	9.7
Hispanic	1.4	3.6
Asian	0.4	1.1
American Indian	0.4	0.3
Other	0.0	0.8

average for women (5%): $t(35) = 4.74$, $p < .00$.

4. The average percentage of men who managed highway facilities (2%) was significantly greater than the comparable average for women (1%): $t(35) = 2.39$, $p < .02$.
5. The average percentage of men who managed other types of facilities (9%) was significantly greater than the comparable percentage for women (3%): $t(35) = 3.59$, $p < .00$.

Thus, it appears that the percentages of male facility managers are significantly greater than the percentages of female managers, regardless of the type of facility operated.

TRAINING STATES

During the survey, five training stages were identified through which potential facility managers must move before they are assigned to facilities: referral for BEP training by a VR agency, acceptance for training, completion of training, licensing, and assignment to the first vending facility. The number of participants and the percentages of women and men who completed each stage in fiscal year 1994 are summarized in Table 3.

A related set of dependent t-tests was used to compare the mean percentages of male and female participants in each stage

of training. The results indicated that the percentages of female participants in all phases of training were significantly lower than the related percentages of male participants. The specific results were (1) referred for training, $t(37) = -7.48$, $p < .00$; (2) accepted for training, $t(37) = -4.92$, $p < .00$; (3) completed training, $t(37) = -4.75$, $p < .00$; (4) licensed, $t(37) = -4.78$, $p < .00$; and (5) assigned to the first facility, $t(37) = -4.59$, $p < .00$.

Generally, these tests indicate that the "success rates" for women and men across the five stages of training were roughly the same, but that three times as many men as women entered and moved through these stages. This finding suggests that there may be a problem recruiting women for BEP training.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Given the preceding finding, the BEP directors were asked to indicate what they thought were their most productive strategies for recruiting women. The majority said they either had no recruitment strategies to attract more women (19 directors), had the same strategies for recruiting men and women (8 directors), or accepted the candidates that VR counselors referred to them (5 directors). The 8 directors who said they used special recruitment strategies mentioned one or more of the following:

Table 3
Total number of applicants and percentages of women and men accepted into the five training stages for BEP facility managers.

Training stages	Number of applicants	% of	
		Women	Men
Referral for BEP training	292	24	76
Acceptance for training	187	27	73
Completion of training	152	25	75
Licensing	104	23	77
Assignment to first facility	92	22	78

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telling women about other successful BEP managers (2 directors), having prospective female trainees meet with successful female BEP managers (2 directors), encour- aging prospective female trainees to work in facilities as relief or part-time workers (1 director), emphasizing the importance of women in BEP facilities (1 director), assigning a female BEP manager to be a mentor for each female trainee (1 director), talking to consumer groups about the need for recruiting women into the BEP (1 director), stressing the opportunity to become an independent self-employed woman (1 director), and emphasizing the fringe benefits associated with such a posi- tion (1 director).

The BEP directors were also asked what SLAs could do to recruit more applicants in general into the BEP. Twelve directors thought that the BEP could be marketed better to VR counselors, potential facility managers, and facilities that serve persons who are blind. They suggested a variety of ways to market the BEP, including reaching out to school-to-work coordinators in underrepresented popuitions; educating women about the BEP before they are placed in other training programs; pro- ducing professional brochures to distribute at job fairs and various blindness-related conferences; providing information about the BEP to agency consumers, colleges, business schools, and residential schools for blind persons; presenting the BEP in a positive way in public education programs; and developing a marketing strategy in ongoing recruitment programs.

Another suggestion mentioned by the 12 BEP directors for recruiting more appli- cants was better communication between the BEP and VR staffs and educating the

staffs of VR agencies so they know more about the BEP and thus refer more qualified persons to it. Two respondents said that VR counselors do not see the BEP as a viable career opportunity and hence do not recom- mend it, and 2 noted that VR counselors use the BEP as a dumping ground for those who cannot succeed elsewhere. Four thought that VR counselors have a negative image of the BEP, and 8 thought that more thor- ough training of VR counselors is needed.

A variety of other suggestions were also noted by the BEP directors. Some sugges- tions were the need to operate facilities as true businesses (3 directors), to make recruitment a priority (2 directors), to close locations that do not make a profit (1 director), to provide opportunities for higher incomes (1 director), to involve the Elected Committee of Blind Vendors more in recruitment and other programmatic responsibilities (1 director), and for the SLA to acquire more locations (1 director). Other suggestions included the need to establish higher-quality standards for facili- ties (1 director); to dispel myths about careers in food service (1 director); to expand the BEP beyond food service (1 director); to increase SLA benefits for managers (1 director); to offer professional training and require certification examina- tions for managers (1 director); to encourage mentorships between successful operators and public schools, vocational- technical schools, and schools for blind persons (1 director); to offer a variety of opportunities to trainees (1 director); and to obtain direct funding to upgrade training facilities (1 director). Three of the 40 BEP directors stated that they had sufficient referrals and did not need to recruit candidates.

Discussion

This study confirmed the small proportion of women in the BEP and found that more effective strategies for recruiting women into the program are needed. One

reason why so few women are recruited, placed in facilities, and promoted to lucrative facilities may be that 79% of the members of the Elected Committees of Blind Vendors are men (as reported, by the 40 BEP directors), who may think (as about

38% of the BEP directors did) that because of their family roles and responsibilities,

women cannot work long hours or relocate to isolated facilities. According to 87% of the BEP directors, however, the lack of lateral or upward movement for female managers is not a problem. Thus, although the percentages of women undergoing the five

stages of training were all significantly lower than the percentages of men, these rates were fairly consistent, which suggests

that women have the same rate of success in training as do men, but that the proportion of those recruited is far lower—one-third that of men.

This study did not disclose the underlying dynamics associated with the underrepresentation of women in the BEP

training process. However, Tucker and Moore's (1997) study offered several recommendations for increasing the recruit-

ment of women into the program:

- Efforts should be made to determine why such a small number of women are recruited into the program.
- SLAs should actively encourage female facility managers to serve on their Elected Committees of Blind Vendors (as regular members, not just alternates).

- SLAs should actively recruit both male and female minorities into the BEP.
- SLAs should examine their rules regarding placement to determine if women are at a disadvantage and to ensure that women are not disproportionately excluded from highway vending facilities.
- SLAs should actively market their program to create new facilities and thereby create new job opportunities for newly licensed facility managers, including women.
- SLAs should consider implementing a policy that requires VR counselors to visit and spend time in BEP facilities as part of their initial training orientation.
- To recruit more women into the program, SLAs should conduct more aggressive recruiting programs at residential schools for blind persons, public schools that have large enrollments of students who are visually impaired, and summer youth programs conducted by comprehensive rehabilitation centers for people who are blind.

There are many employment opportunities for women who are legally blind in the BEP, and it is incumbent on all staff mem-

bers of state VR licensing agencies and of the BEP to ensure that more women are informed about this program and that those

who apply are given every opportunity to participate in it. It is hoped that this article will stimulate further research on the disparity in the number of women and men

who participate. Future research should also investigate whether women are simply not choosing the BEP or whether they are not being made aware of this self-employment opportunity.

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